



Choosing a Quality Child Care Provider

By Carrie Mayne

Regardless of whether parents choose or are forced by circumstance to work, leaving your child with someone else to be cared for is never easy. The guilt can weigh heavily on parents' psyches, but if the child is under the care of a loving, well-trained, high-quality provider the situation will be much more comfortable for both the parents and the child. Group settings can be beneficial for child development and socialization, and having other adults in a child's life that love and care for them is helpful for a child's self-esteem.

Finding a high-quality child care facility that meets your individual needs and priorities can be difficult. It's important, however, to start the search as soon as you find out you're expecting or even as you begin planning for a family. You can never be too careful or too organized when it comes to choosing a provider. They are, after all, going to be part of the team of adults responsible for the development of your child.

A parent's first instinct may be to open a phone book to the child care section and start writing down names and phone numbers. This isn't a bad idea, but you may first want to refine your search by asking friends and acquaintances for recommendations. Doing so will reduce the amount of "cold calls" you'll have to make. Ask family members who you know would look for the same qualities in a child care provider as you. Ask acquaintances at work; they'll know what facilities will work with the specific nuances of your office schedule (e.g., late hours, four-day weeks, etc.).

According to Christine Zavala, Associate Director of a Salt Lake child care facility, the biggest mistake she sees parents make when searching for a day care provider is not giving themselves enough time to adequately search and prepare. She says the more facilities parents visit the more they will understand what they are looking for, what is available to them, what they can expect, and why a high-quality educator is so important. Tour as many facilities as possible and

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realize that many centers have long waiting lists, so if you like what you see, ask to be added to their waiting list.

When touring a facility, parents should be ready with a list of questions to ask the facility director and features to be looking for. Some of these things will be unique to the family's values and circumstances, but others are universal such as security and safety, cleanliness, organization, and age-specific and developmental stage-specific care.

Christine Zavala suggests asking as many questions as possible to get a full understanding of a care center's policies concerning these features. Also, make sure to visit the actual classrooms so you can verify that their policies are being practiced. She notes that a parent should not worry about taking up the facility director's time. If that director is truly invested in early childhood development then s/he won't mind (and in fact will probably enjoy) answering your questions and familiarizing you with their program.

Another very important factor to think about is communication between parents and care givers. It's an essential part of building consistency and minimizing stress and disruption for your child. Ask the provider how they communicate with parents at all levels, from the minutiae of daily tasks (diaper changings, eating, fussiness, etc.) to the broader picture of your child's brain development (reaching milestones, developing healthy attachments, etc.). The more communication there is, the more comfortable everyone will feel (parents, child, and child care provider) and the better the child development team will function.

Most parents probably aren't aware that there are national accreditation programs for child development centers. You can search on the internet for different accreditation programs and a list of their Utah approved providers. One of the largest programs is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which can be found at www.naeyc.org. ©



For more information:

- Child Care Resource and Referral has a comprehensive guide for choosing a high-quality provider. Download it from their web site: http://centralpt.com/upload/353/2684_ourGuidetoChoosingQualityChildCare2006.pdf
- To find out if you're eligible for child care payment assistance or for help finding child care, visit this web site: <http://jobs.utah.gov/opencms/occ/occ2/index.html>